Planning Presentations with AIMC

You've already learned that a real-world presentation approach to public speaking means that you avoid writing and reciting scripts. That does not mean, however, that the speeches we do in this course will be unplanned. While you may not write out the words you'll say or decide on exact phrases, you will think about the basic content you want to cover, the arguments you want to make, the stories you want to tell, and how they will all be organized together. To develop each of these elements most effectively, you should aim to follow the presentation-planning process of **AIMC** (Burke, Conway, & DiFrancesco, 2000).

AIMC is an approach that was developed right here at Southern Connecticut State University. It was first published in a workbook entitled AIMC: Communication Tool for Life, written by Dr. Karen P. Burke, Roger Conway, Sr., and Sandra DiFrancesco. AIMC is an acronym that stands for the four major considerations of the presentation-planning process *in the order in which you should consider them*: Audience, Intent, Message, and Channel.

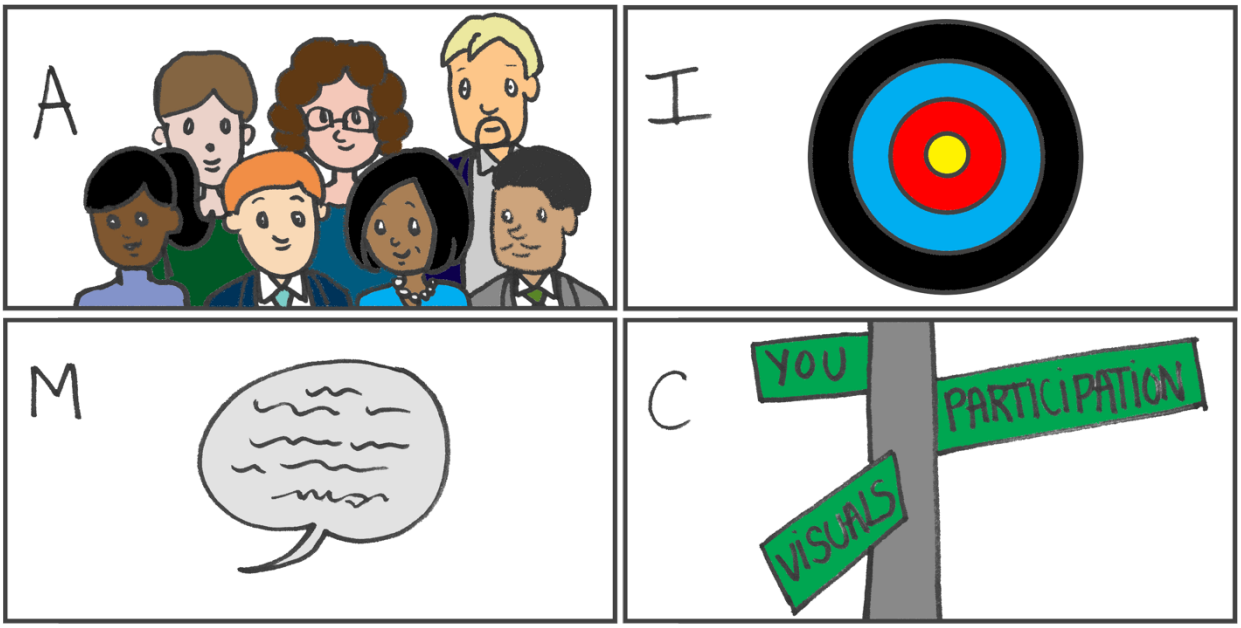

Figure 1. AIMC.
Cartoon by Audrey Mora, 2014.

A = Audience

For a presentation to be successful, the audience must be the central focus. If they don't understand what you are saying or they are not convinced by what you are proposing, then you might as well have been speaking to the air. The very first step of planning what you will present, therefore, must start with an analysis of the people to whom you will speak. The topic you choose should matter to the audience (that is, they should have some motivation for listening to you). The evidence you give, the stories you tell, the language you use—all of these choices should be made based on the audience that you have. A presentation aimed at bullying and harassment would be presented to elementary-school kids very differently than it would be presented to full-grown adults in a workplace.

Even if audience differences aren't quite so pronounced as the distinctions between young school children and working adults, it is still true that every audience is unique. The examples I give in my own classroom discussions for public speaking differ for each class I teach. For instance, when I am offering up sample topics that students might choose for an upcoming presentation, I try to tailor those suggestions to the people I am teaching and the interests or skillsets they might have. This adjustment to your specific listeners is called an **audience-centered approach**, and it is the cornerstone of a successful presentation.

That point cannot be emphasized enough: *being audience-centered is crucial to your presentation's success*. At no point in your presentation should the audience wonder, "What does this have to do with me?" or "Why should I care about this?" If the audience cannot answer those questions, then you have failed to consider fully the A in AIMC.

So, how do you consider your audience effectively when planning a presentation? As a first step, you should do an **audience analysis**. In other words, you should try to research the type of people (or the exact people, if you can) who will be listening to your pitch. There are three levels of analysis you can do:

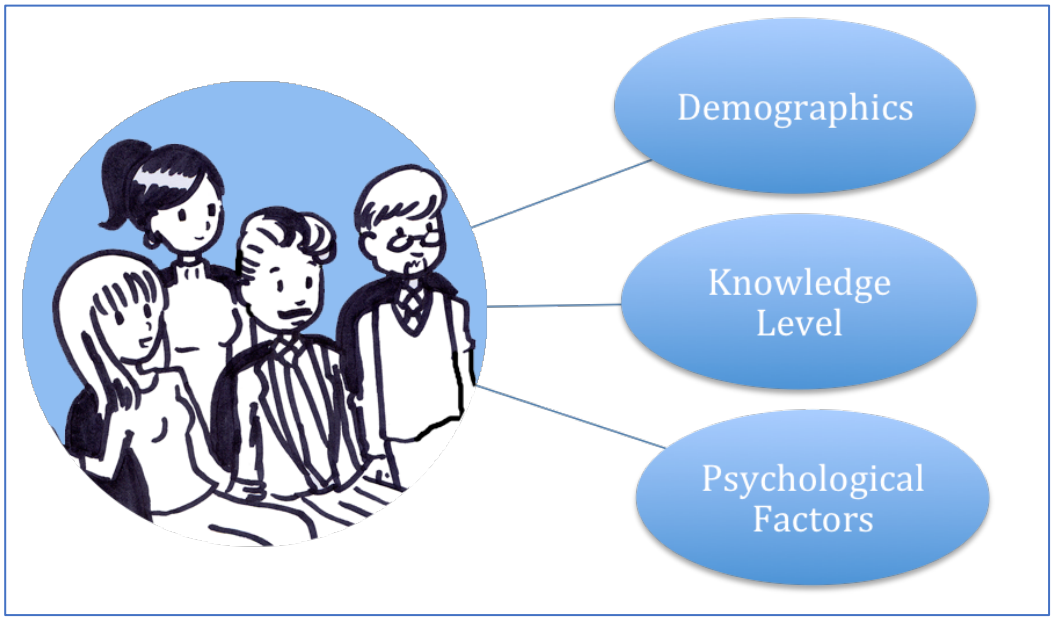

Figure 2. The three levels of audience analysis.
Cartoon by Audrey Mora, 2014.

1. **Demographic analysis: who they are.** *Demographics* consist of the kind of information that might be on a census: age, employment, socioeconomic status, religion, race, gender, marital status, etc. It's most often the case that you will talk to audiences that are mixed in most (if not all) of these areas. If there are some commonalities, however, take note of them.

   Who your audience members are affects how you can or should approach your topic with them. For instance, if you are talking to a room full of staunch Republicans, using quotes from Democratic leaders like Kamala Harris to support your claims will likely hurt your credibility in the audiences' eyes. Instead, you would want to find testimony from figures your audience is more likely to respect and believe, like Republican figureheads Ronald Reagan or Abraham Lincoln, even if the basic message is the same as the Harris quote.

Let me give you an important note of caution in using demographic information to plan your presentation: demographics can help you guide your message, but you need to be careful not to rely on stereotypes of any of the groups to whom you speak. For instance, if you were speaking to an audience of college women about career goals, you shouldn't presume that they all want to have children or that, if they did, they would want to be a stay-at-home mom or the primary caregiver. Those are questions to ask your audience directly so you could determine how much detail to give on topics like maternity leave or "mothers' hours" jobs. So, here's the key point on this: choose topics, sources, and approaches that are relevant to the people in your audience, but don't presume to know all the habits and attitudes of individuals based solely on their demographic characteristics.

2. **Knowledge level: what they know.** The next step of your audience analysis would be to find out your audience's knowledge level on your potential topic. Many corporate trainers will start training sessions with pre-tests to see how much information participants already know, so they can adjust the topics they cover accordingly. The goal of informative speaking is to give your audience *new* information, not just repeat what they already know; therefore, figuring out your audience's starting knowledge level is a good first step.

   This type of analysis is also important in persuasive speaking. If you were trying to convince school administrators to extend the hours of Conn Hall or other eating establishments on campus, they may already be aware of the food-service hours. What they may not know, however, is the student experience that would lead students to need later meal hours. If you had sports practice or classes until late and had no other times in which you could eat dinner except after those commitments, that would be knowledge you would want to share with the administration so they could understand the fundamental problem students are facing. Having an idea as to what your audience knows about your topic allows you to determine what your presentation ought to cover and where it should start.

3. **Psychological factors: how they feel.** In presentations, your audience's feelings and preferences are incredibly important, especially in persuasion. The psychological factors to consider in an audience analysis are attitudes, beliefs, and values. Let's quickly review all three:
   - *Attitudes.* An **attitude** reflects whether someone likes a thing, person, or idea. If you're selling the latest MacBook to Apple enthusiasts, your pitch might focus on how this is just the latest and greatest from a company that is always on the cutting edge of technology. If you're pitching them to PC users, you might focus instead on how intuitive the operating system is and how the benefits over PCs make switching to a Mac worth the initial learning curve and extra cost.
   - *Beliefs.* A **belief** is a person's perception of what is true and what is false, whether those beliefs are factually correct or not. Knowing this information can help you identify barriers your audience might have to receiving your message. For instance, if you're trying to convince someone to vote in the next election and that person believes that American elections are all rigged, you would first need to spend some time debunking that myth.
   - *Values.* A **value** is a person's judgment about what is important. For instance, one value of this school is environmental consciousness. If you want to convince SCSU administrators to set up solar-powered charging stations around campus, you could note that such a proposal

fits well into their go-green initiative. Recognizing and speaking to the values of your audience goes a long way toward making you likeable and toward helping audiences see the benefit of your proposal for them.

By engaging in these levels of analysis—whether you can ask the audience members directly, find out through background research, or take your best guess by trying to think from their perspectives—you will be able to tailor your presentation to the wants, needs, and realities of your audience.

I = Intent

In his best-selling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey (1989) asserts that in order to be successful at any task, one needs to "begin with the end in mind." In other words, you need to know the specific goal you hope to attain with your presentation. What is the benchmark for your presentation's success? This objective is the second step of AIMC: the intent.

Your **intent** should be a one-sentence statement that describes what you hope your specific audience will know, think, or do by the end of the presentation. Write this statement down somewhere handy so it can serve as your guide as you plan your message. As you search for evidence, consider stories to tell, or select your visual aids, you need to ask yourself consistently, "Will this help me meet my intent?" If the answer is "no," then it should be left out.

So, what makes a good statement of intent? Your intent should focus on the audience, be clear, and be realistic. Imagine a statement of intent like this: "I want to teach my audience about Microsoft Word's dictation features." This statement would be difficult to use as a planning guide. Who is your audience? This statement is all about you the speaker, but presentations should be about the audience. Moreover, what is your audience getting out of this? In other words, what should they have gained by the end? Your presentation could cover almost anything about the dictation features (including rather pointless "fun" facts like who first developed it or how many words are in its dataset) to meet your vague intent of "teaching," but that doesn't mean that your audience got anything useful out of your presentation.

Instead, a more specific statement of intent—one that identifies the audience and what goals they ought to reach—would be a far more effective measure: "By the end of this presentation, my CMS 101 classmates will be able to use the dictation features on Microsoft Word to write a simple reflection paper." A clear, audience-focused statement allows you to plan your presentation effectively, stay on track while planning and presenting, and evaluate how successful the presentation was when it is over.

Bad, Better, Best – Statement of Intent		
Bad	"I will prove that I'm a good teammate."	*Who is the audience and what do you want them to know, think, or feel by the end of your presentation?*
Better	"By the end of my presentation, I will show my classmates that I'd be a good teammate."	*You're audience is identified, but the overall goal is still too focused on the speaker.*
Best	"By the end of my presentations, my CMS 101 classmates will want me on their team for an upcoming presentation."	*This statement identifies the specific audience as well as what you want them to feel by the end of your presentation.*

Figure 3. Three versions of a statement of intent*. Aim to make yours like the "Best" option.*

M = Message

Once your audience has been analyzed and your intent has been identified, it's time to start planning the meat of your presentation: the M for message. The **message** encompasses all that you will say to your audience. This will include several factors, like the claims you will make, the evidence you will use to support those claims, the stories you will tell, and how you will compile those elements into a clear organization—all of which we explore in further detail as we move through this course. As we work through some of these elements, you may notice that some of the advice for the message planning of your presentations will come from the traditional public-speaking realm (an art form highly focused on formulating effective messages). If you remember, though, the presentations you do in this course—and will likely do throughout your post-college career—differ significantly from traditional public speaking in several important ways. Thus, there are some key concepts to keep in mind about the message and how the messages you plan in this course will *differ* from traditional public speaking:

1. **The message should not be written out.** While we will look at some facets of traditional public speaking to learn about effective messaging, you will not be writing out phrases or sentences to memorize for your presentations in this course. Most of the presenting you will do in your professional life will not require the poeticism or verbal grace of a Martin Luther King, Jr. or a John F. Kennedy; it will, however, require the conversational approach needed to reach your audience effectively. Thus, we will focus on learning to speak clearly and persuasively without notes or scripts in this course, since those skills will be the most beneficial to you in your growth as a competent communicator.
2. **The message should be adjusted as needed throughout the presentation.** Traditional speechwriting runs on the presumption that the speaker can deliver the speech almost exactly as written without interruption. That is not what we are doing in this class. As we now already know, the audience is central to your presentation's success. Thus, listening and adjusting to their feedback—verbal and nonverbal—throughout the presentation is crucial in ensuring that you meet your presentation's intent. Without a script, this conversational adjustment becomes much easier and more natural.
3. **The message depends completely upon your audience and your intent.** Speeches—especially the big ones—are often expected to have an impact beyond the immediate audience and context in which they are delivered. In presenting, though, you are not speaking for the ages; you are speaking for the here and now. Your message needs to be tailored specifically to the folks to whom you are talking, since they are the ones who will determine whether your presentation has met its intent or not.

C = Channel

The last consideration in the presentation-planning process is the **channel** through which you will deliver the message. While the message is *what* you will tell the audience, the channel is *how* you will tell them. There are three basic channels you can use to deliver your presentation (and these can happen concurrently):

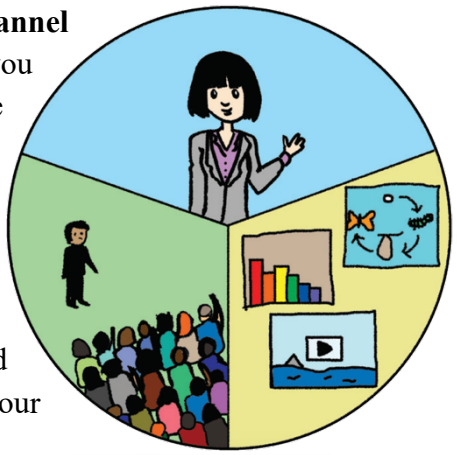

Figure 4. The three components of the channel: you, audience interaction, and visual aids. Cartoon by Audrey Mora, 2014.

1. **You.** Not surprisingly, the simplest way to share a presentation is by saying it out loud. You, therefore, are the primary channel. The words you say are the message, but how you say them is the channel. Everything from your tone of voice to your hand gestures, from your rate of speech to your eye contact, from your facial expressions to your clothes communicate your message or the context of your message to your audience. We will explore many of these facets of verbal and nonverbal communication throughout this course.
2. **Audience interaction.** I've said it multiple times already, and I will keep on saying it: *presentations should be like conversations*, and this means that you will need to get your audience involved in the presentation. In some instances, this simply will be asking them what questions they have or having short conversations with them, but in other cases, this may involve more direct and prolonged participation, like doing group activities to demonstrate concepts or products. The level of interaction you choose will depend upon the audience, the intent, and the message being sent.
3. **Visual aids.** The last channel—the use of external visual aids—is the only one that is truly optional. For some presentations—like the first and last ones you do in this course—there will be no need for visuals beyond your own nonverbal communication. In other cases, though, external visuals can help to communicate concepts or support claims that cannot adequately be expressed through the first two channels alone. In short, if you need to communicate a point visually, you use a visual aid; otherwise, you don't. We will talk more about visual aids—particularly as they relate to PowerPoint—and when and how to use them later in this course.

All Together Now: AIMC

Audience, intent, message, channel—these are the four steps of the presentation-planning process that we will be following this semester and that you will hopefully continue to follow for presentation planning long beyond this course. Remember these steps in this order: audience, intent, message, channel. AIMC. Love it. Follow it. Let it guide you. It knows the way.

References

Burke, K. P., Conway, Sr., R., & DiFrancesco, S. (2000). *AIMC: A communication tool for life.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change.* New York: Simon and Schuster.